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National monuments include vast areas of land that the White House can designate for special protection. David Greene talks to former Interior Secretary Sally Jewell, who served under President Obama.

DAVID GREENE, HOST:

The word monument can be a structure. Think Washington Monument. But national monuments can also be vast areas of land that the White House can designate for special protection. To conservationists and in some cases tribal communities, this is so important, keeping sacred lands pristine. But ranchers and local residents have fought often bitterly to stop presidents from, in their eyes, overreaching. They seemed to find an ally in President Trump, who accused former President Obama of a federal land grab in the designations he made.

Trump's Interior secretary, Ryan Zinke, spent months reviewing 27 different national monuments, and he's made recommendations to the president. We don't have many details at this point, but Zinke has suggested that none of the monuments would be eliminated, though he told the Associated Press a, quote, "handful" will be reduced in size.

Sally Jewell was Interior secretary under President Obama and oversaw some of these designations. She's on the line with us. Secretary Jewell, good morning.

SALLY JEWELL: Good morning, David.

GREENE: So there was some speculation that the Trump administration might actually eliminate some monuments. If indeed it's a handful being reduced in size, is that good news? Is that a relief for you?

JEWELL: No, it's not a relief at all. I don't believe that the president has the authority to revoke or eliminate any national monuments. And I think his whole review is ill-advised.

GREENE: Doesn't have the authority. I mean, are you saying this is something that Congress would have to be involved in before it would actually happen? I guess there is very little precedent for this taking place.

JEWELL: Yeah, exactly. The Antiquities Act was created back in 1906 because there were many Native American sacred sites that were being destroyed and looted. And so the president was given the authority to act very quickly to protect those objects of cultural interest, but also objects of scientific interest and beyond. And no president has revoked a monument. That's not been done. And the only time they've modified it has been for relatively minor boundary adjustments. And even that was cleared up by further action in - taken by Congress in 1976 and 1970 that clarified that only Congress has that ability.

GREENE: The law you mentioned, you know, it allowed a president to act very quickly. And especially in a state like Utah and elsewhere, there was a lot of anger at your former boss, President Obama, for taking some of these actions. And just looking at the record, I mean, he created or expanded monuments 29 times. That was more than any other president. He set aside more land than any president. Is it possible that you overreached?

JEWELL: Well, actually, he set aside more water than any president. Lands and waters are what was concerned with national monuments. There was a very large designation in Alaska under the Carter administration which subsequently was modified by Congress. I absolutely do not think he was overreaching. Our country is growing. There is additional pressures on public lands like never before. And we only acted within the Obama administration where we felt that threats to those public lands were imminent and it was critical that the

president act.

GREENE: One of the things that infuriated the opposition was when the president, President Obama, in his final days created the Bears Ears National Monument in Utah, which is named after those two beautiful buttes in the desert there. And our colleagues here at NPR spoke to a resident in this past spring, Jami Bayles, who was pretty offended at the idea that this area even needed protection.

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JAMI BAYLES: We keep that place pristine. We keep it clean. We keep - you know, we check on it all the time. And so I guess my argument is, OK, yeah, it belongs to everybody, but not everybody has been taking care of it.

GREENE: So she actually raises a concern that a national monument designation actually can draw traffic, can draw development, can draw attention, and that locals really know how best to protect land like that. Isn't that a valid argument?

JEWELL: Well, I think it could be a valid argument if the world was static. But the reality is that areas such as Bears Ears have been looted, looted by pot hunters, and sacred sites have been destroyed. And people have used the land in ways that are not conducive to the care and management of the objects there. And that was happening at Bears Ears.

Now, with geotagging on our cell phones, when people go out and they find an object or a cultural site that has been left intact since time immemorial and they post pictures on Twitter or Facebook, people then know where that site is. So over time, the threats to these landscapes have continued to evolve and get worse, which is why additional land protection is so critical at this time.

GREENE: Let me just finish in the few seconds we have left. I mean, this is a time of such little compromise in Washington. I think everyone can agree on that. Might this be an opportunity for some? I mean, why not say, OK, President Trump might reduce the size of a few of these monuments but leave most intact, we can live with that?

JEWELL: Because it's only Congress that has the authority to do that.

And I think, you know, people want to make recommendations to Congress, that's fine. But there are - I've been to Bears Ears multiple times, including in recent months, and the artifacts there absolutely need protection. And it's tribes that have asked us to do that. And I believe that their rights should be honored. Just as this president is defending Confederate monuments, I think he should do the same for those that are sacred to Native Americans.

GREENE: Sally Jewell was secretary of the Interior under President Obama. Thanks a lot.

JEWELL: Thank you very much, David.

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